

A brief history of Murray Town, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Sam Walker

Murray Town village is situated in the western peninsular of Sierra Leone. It is a seaside village, (villages in Freetown are either described as seaside or mountain villages) bordering Congo Town to the East, Aberdeen and Lumley to the West and Wilberforce to the North. The village boundary extends as far as a small river known as 'wan coppo wata' on the boundary with Lumley.

The area covered by Murray Town, like other villages had been ceded by several local chiefs and Kings in the area later to become known as Freetown by King Naimbana, King Firama, and King Tom and others for the settlement of emancipated and liberated Africans. Treaties ceding Freetown for the settlers were signed on behalf of the British government "....for the sole benefit of the free community of settlers, their heirs and successors, lately arrived from England...."

(see the complete collection of the Treaties and Conventions and Reciprocal Regulations at present subsisting between Great Britain and Foreign Powers.....compiled by Sir Edward Herstlet, CB. Vol XI V 1880

Murray Town was named after Mr. George Murray who was the Secretary of State for the colonies in 1829. Like most villages in Freetown, it was settled by liberated Africans in the early 19th century either with the authority of the colonial governors who had decided to divide the surrounding areas of Freetown into parishes for administrative purposes, or by occupation of three hundred and twenty six liberated Africans who were brought to this area of Freetown by the British Royal Navy West Africa Squadron.

Murray Town is unique in its ethnicity of being overwhelmingly from the Egba tribe of Nigeria whose vernacular is Yoruba. Today the village is a kaleidoscope of ethnicities.

The village has very strong Christian Methodist traditions. The Church Missionary Society (the Anglican Church) does not have a strong connection or influence in Murray Town unlike other villages especially the mountain villages.

The first Church that was built in Murray Town was Ebenezer Methodist Church with a very strong Wesleyan influence. The foundation stone of this church was laid in 1820 and the building completed in 1826. The Church received financial and other support from the British Methodist Church until 1964 when it became an autonomous body within World Methodism.

The other Church in the village is Jordan (West African Methodist) Church. In 1844, the Acting Governor of Sierra Leone, Benjamin Chilly Pyne bought a small piece of land for the price of £5 for the recaptives and liberated slaves at the place where the church is located today, the address then was 7 Queen Street Murray Town.

Both Churches continue to play a pivotal role in the spiritual life of the people in Murray Town in spite of the proliferation of charismatic/Pentecostal churches in the city, Freetown.

The village can also boast one of the oldest markets in the villages in the Freetown peninsular. Built in 1934, Hudson market, named after Governor Hudson continues to thrive in vibrant surroundings. When the foundation stone of the market was laid two young people were supervised to plant two fruit trees in the grounds of the market. Gwendoline Brandon

who is one of our Life Patrons planted a banana tree; Cornelius Tami Johnson of the Reffell family, planted a coconut tree. Sadly, Mr. Johnson died about 20 years ago.

The officials at the opening ceremony of the market included the Acting District Commissioner, Mr. L.E.V. Dunkerly; the Headman, Mr. John Oduntor Lewis, Mr. T.C Fraser, George W. Fraser, E.A Johnson, J.P Cole, C. Obadiah Macauley, popularly known as Grandpa Obi and W.E Taylor.

The village is proud to have two of the oldest secondary schools in Freetown; the Sierra Leone Grammar School, (formerly C.M.S Grammar School) founded in 1845, and the West African Methodist Collegiate School founded in 1911.

The Headquarters of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces is based at Murray Town; also the first prostheses centre providing specialist knowledge and services to lower limb amputee patients, the first fishing industry in Sierra Leone, the first national College of Nursing, Sierra Leone School for the Blind, the first sports club in the country, Aqua Sports Club, Krio Descendants Union Cultural Centre now under construction, The Davidson Nicol Medical Centre, named after Dr Davidson Nicol in Cole Farm, etc.

Murray Town was known for real or imagined stories about serious physical or psychological consequences on anyone who passes through OLOSHORO, (a small stream which leads into the heart of the village), with evil or malicious intent on any born and bred resident of the village. Another story was that any uncircumcised male that passes through this stream would by some mystery, become circumcised. These stories have all gone into the realms of Murray Town mythologies.

The village also have a local water well known as *Aku wata*. This water-well served a large part of the interior of the village stretching from Murray Town Road to Cole Street and as far as the area around Aqua Sports Club. Children would carry buckets on their heads to and from the water-well from whatever the distance. It was the main source of water for residents. Water from this water-well was mainly used for domestic use including cooking. Drinking water was mainly from Oloshoro and Odoké another underground stream located close to Aberdeen Road and Murray Town cemetery. Another underground stream was Banana Wata located close to Oloshoro. Interestingly, fetching water from *Aku wata* served several social purposes. It was the meeting place for young pubescent lovers; boys who would like to show off their dexterity in lowering buckets tied to a rope down the well and the skill of how to tilt the bucket on the surface of the water, fill the bucket and pull it up, and pour into another bucket which is then carried on the head and taken home and

poured into a drum for domestic use. Aku wata was also the place for young people to go and bond with friends, show off their academic ability by quoting works of Shakespeare, Canterbury Tales, Things Fall Apart, Wordsworth or other literary greats to impress the *girls* and generally to *get up to no good. It was in this place that plots were hatched among friends of how to get the attention of a girl/boy (but mainly girl) that one is interested in but shy to approach directly.*

The village has produced many luminaries, people of outstanding qualities and social and religious stature. Several 'Firsts' from the village including Sir Samuel Lewis, the first African to be knighted, Mrs. Lati Hyde Forster the first African woman to get a degree from Fourah Bay College (Durham University) and went on to become the first female African Principal of the oldest girls school in Sierra Leone, the Annie Walsh Memorial School for Girls; the first African Head of Government Printing Mr. Feijimi Brandon; the first African Secretary of the Sierra Leone Red Cross Mrs Gladys Brandon; the first African Head of the Public Relations Office of the colonial administration, later as Permanent Secretary Ministry of Information, Thomas Decker; he was also a journalist, linguist and writer in Krio and promoter of the Krio Language. Thomas Decker translated Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and As you like it (udat de kiap fit) into krio, David Sholanke Fraser, the first Sierra Leonean Mining Engineer and his brother Itunumi Fraser, the first Sierra Leonean to head the Sierra Leone External Telecommunications (S.L.E.T). In 2006, Murray Town produced another first: Rev. Dr. Olivia Wesley was appointed the first African woman principal of Theological College, Sierra Leone.

The village is also proud to have very strong connections with the family of Edward Wilmot Blyden the famous Pan-Africanist, who had inter-continental connections with Africa, the Caribbean and North America; and also Mr Charles Dunbar Burgess King a descendant of Murray Town who travelled to Liberia and became the 17th President of the country and is the great, great grandfather of the present King family of Murray Town.

There were also personalities who were not really comedians but had unsurpassed abilities to make people laugh, individually or collectively, even in depressing or harsh social conditions. Characters such as Johnny Peters, Abiodun John fondly known as "GAPÉ" and Abayomi Wilson fondly known as "Abai". It is also to be remembered that Murray Town was a close knit village with parents and elders looking out as it were for the safety and protection of children. Every adult male or female became an uncle or aunt to any young child. On New Year's Day for example, parents and children would take part in sport events

organised by Kweku Fraser (popularly known as Dada) and Feijimi Brandon; at a later stage in the development of the village, Solomon Ina Manley took over the responsibility for organising these events. These activities effectively bonded the villagers culturally, socially and religiously. Kweku Fraser and Feijimi Brandon were active agents for social progress in the village introducing among other things YMCA and the Boys Scouts. The village also had a football team, Murray Town Rovers, playing in the first division of the football league in Freetown. Among those who were regular players were Josiah P. Macauley, Francis J. Walker, Itunumi Fraser, and Ikudaisi Adonijah Taylor who was organist at Ebenezer Church, and Frederick D. Johnson who was organist at Jordan (W.A.M) Church. Among others who became players in the 1960s/70's were Collins Thomas, Sigismond Tucker, Conton Sesay and Maxim Bright.

There is a long list of prominent families in the village worth noting, but limited space will not allow me to name all of them; but to mention a few and at the risk of serious criticism I will mention the Lewis, Fraser, Hyde, Bright, Cole, Macauley, Brandon, king, and Noah families.

Cultural Traditions/Practices in Murray Town

Another interesting feature of life in the village is that though Murraytonians accepted and practised western traditions of belief and practice including the mysteries of freemasonry, they continued to adhere to traditional customs such as 'Awujoh', 'Comojade or pull nar doe' and participate as members or supporters of African secret societies such as Ojeh, Hunting and ORO as a way of maintaining their African identity.

One of the highlights of New Year's Day is the traditional visit by family and friends to visit the graves of those who have died, have the graves tidied up, whitewashed and flowers planted. The atmosphere is usually a mixture of solemnity and piety juxtaposed with laughter, merriment and celebration. During the visit the cultural tradition and practice of talking to the dead, an invocation of the spirit will be done. Integral to this practice is the pouring of alcohol and water on the grave and the left overs passed round to those gathered around the grave. An essential pre-requisite for this cultural practice or custom is kola nuts, both red and white and split in two. Families are known to settle disputes on the family graves.

The Ojeh and Hunting secret societies, both imported from Nigeria were prevalent among Krio people in the village and were respected and revered. These societies played a pivotal role in the cohesiveness of society and their practices were jealously guarded by members who were normally Krios. Membership has now been opened up to non-Krio people.

The Orro secret society, another import from Nigeria exclusively comes out at midnight . The Town Cryer would give notice of the imminence of this 'night play' as it is called, at least two weeks before the start of the practice of this revered society to warn the villagers to stay indoors before a particular time when 'play begins'

Like many other places in Freetown, Murray Town has experienced several social and demographic changes, but the village remains socially vibrant, religiously tolerant, educationally upward, an exemplar of hospitality to neighbours and strangers. In the annals of history, Murray Town has a place, deservedly so, in the mosaic of regional contributors to the development of Sierra Leone.

Bibliography

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Jordan West African Methodist Church Anniversary booklets

Interviewees : Gwendoline Brandon

Emmanuel Ahlakor (Deceased)

Hannah Orehdola Williams nee Graff

Babatunde Blyden

Mrs. Abba Fraser-Leigh

Reminiscences with contemporaries

Addendum

The West African Methodist Connexion is a breakaway from the Wesleyan Methodist Society in the mid nineteenth century because the emancipated Africans who were brought to Freetown mainly from Nova Scotia in Canada did not treat the Recaptive Africans with respect and were considered inferior and undignified for them to preach from the pulpit or take on other senior and responsible role in the church in the same way the emancipated Africans were able to.

A rift ensued between the Nova Scotian emancipated slaves who were already Wesleyan in doctrine and practice and had a settled presence at Wesleyan Methodist Society of Rawdon Street, now known as College Chapel and the Recaptive Africans. The Recaptives were those individuals who were bought and were being transported to the New World, but were re-captured in the high seas by British vessels and taken to Freetown.

Led by Anthony O'Connor also a receptive and John Yaskey and others they built many churches between 1844 and 1859, often with considerable difficulty.

With the exception of few years when the West African Methodist Connexion was associated with the United Methodist Free Church and therefore received support, The West African Methodist Connexion has remained wholly independent and self financing but its

practice and liturgy remains “Wesleyan Methodist”.

End notes: *the complete collection of the Treaties and Conventions and Reciprocal Regulations at present subsisting between Great Britain and Foreign Powers.....compiled by Sir Edward Herstlet, CB. Vol X1V 1880*

..... and for the sole benefit of the free community of settlers, their heirs and successors, lately arrived from England, and tinder the protection of the British Government, have granted, and by these presents do grant and for ever quit claim to a certain district of land for the settling of thc» said free community to be theirs, their heirs and successors, for ever ; that is to say, all the land,wood, water, &c, which are now contained from the bay commonly called Frenchman's Bay, but by these presents changed to that of St. George's Bay, coastwise up the River SierraLeone to Gambia Island, and southerly or inland from the river side, 20 miles. And further, be it known unto all men that I,King Nambaner, do faithfully promise and swear for my Chiefs, gentlemen, and.....

TREATY between the Governor of Sierra Leone and King Firama and King Torn. Trade, 8fc. Robiss, July 10, 1807. Treaty of Peace and Alliance between the Governor of the Colony of Sierra Leone for the Sierra Leone Company on the one part, and King Firama and King Tom with their Princes and Headmen on the other part.

1. It is agreed that there shall henceforth be peace and friendship between the British Colony of Sierra Leone and King Firama and King Tom, and all the Princes, headmen, and people subject.

2. King Firama and King Tom, with the consent of all the headmen at this time assembled, do hereby surrender to His Majesty the King of Great Britain, for the use and benefit of the Sierra Leone company, all the right, power, and possessions of every sort and kind in the peninsula of Sierra Leone and its dependencies which they or either of them formerly had to the westward of the colony of Sierra Leone or any part thereof.

3. It is nevertheless agreed that the claim of the proprietors of Bance Island to the possession of Cape Sierra Leone and the adjacent land shall not be altered or affected by this Treaty,neither shall the claims of any other person or persons to the same or any part thereof be affected or altered by it ; but all such claims shall remain the same as if this Treaty had never been made.

4. No native town shall be built nearer to the colony than Robiss, except Robiss, Salt Town, and Ro-Cupra; the land between Robiss and Ro-Cupra shall be left to the people of those places for their luggars ; and in consideration ot the per mission thus given to rebuild Ro-Cupra, the Governor of Sierra Leone shall have the right to make what use he thinks proper of Sig. Domingo's point and the land adjacent thereto, he engaging to make a reasonable compensation to Sig. Domingo for the same.....

Part of this narrative was first published in September 1990 and written by Sam Walker

The author was born in Murray Town, Freetown Sierra Leone and worked for more than twenty years as Director of Black Cultural Archives in London.

